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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary assessment and proposed plan of action resulting from a discussion of the state of religious history in Indiana schools. A group of teachers, professors, and administrators met informally in these discussions to identify opportunities for change. The group recognized that religion has been a major force in history, and has been central in the shaping of the cultural and communal identities that constitute the U.S. experience. At the elementary, secondary, and even postsecondary levels, however, such scholarship has not been used, perhaps because of concern that the teaching of religious history violates constitutional separation of church and state. A review of curriculum and reading materials discloses a lack of emphasis on religion as a factor in history. The study and understanding of the role of religion in U.S. history is key to a real insight into the development and character of U.S. communities. In the absence of such historical perception, students, and the community as a whole, develop a deformed view of the role played by religion and religious institutions in the common life. If progress is to be made and change effected, these concerns must be shared by schools, local and state historical and cultural groups, and religious institutions (chiefly but not exclusively congregations). Strategies for change in each of the 3 groups are enumerated. A plan of action presented consists of five steps: (1) initial discussion of the proposal; (2) environmental scan; (3) report; (4) planning conference; and (5) programming. (DK)

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Religious History in the Schools: A Preliminary Assessment

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RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT
June, 1993

I. Introduction

Since January, 1992, a small group of teachers, college and university educators, and historical, educational, and philanthropic agency administrators has been meeting informally to discuss the state of religious history in Indiana schools and to identify opportunities for change. (The discussants are listed at the end of this statement.) Having met seven times, the group has decided to issue this preliminary assessment and a proposed plan of action for the following eighteen to twenty-four months.

II. The Problem

We recognize that religion has been a major force in history. As noted in a recent article in the American Historical Association newsletter, Perspectives, because "the history of religion and the impact of religious issues on freedom, rights, and responsibilities have, over time, helped to shape the modern world and its institutions, the academic study of religion is essential to a complete education." Religious experience has also been central in the shaping of the cultural and communal identities that constitute the American experience. The historical profession has confirmed this by including "the history of religion in that body of knowledge that constitutes the basic content material in the discipline."

At the elementary, secondary, and even postsecondary levels, however, we have not as a rule made use of such scholarship -- perhaps because of competing pressures from community groups, organizations, and interested individuals, limited training in the field, or fear that

teaching of religious history violates constitutional separation of church and state. Textbook publishers, teachers, and school administrators need to become aware of and find a means to overcome this educational lag.

A review of curriculum and reading materials has disclosed, not surprisingly, a lack of emphasis on religion as a factor in history. Where mentioned, religion tends to be treated unevenly (for example, Puritanism is examined, but the religious component of twentieth century movements is ignored) or provincially (for instance, little treatment is given to religious expression that is not Judaeo-Christian). This problem is especially acute in textbooks in elementary and secondary school history/social studies.

One reason for this is that as the twentieth century has unfolded, a variety of special topics and interests (most recently, for example, AIDS and substance abuse) have received special attention. The curriculum is under pressure to add these, but there are limits to the number of items that the curriculum can bear. Religious history must, instead, be approached as a fundamental aspect of learning, because issues of value and morality have been central to the American political, economic, social, intellectual, and cultural experience. Religious history may also suffer from the tendency to treat American history in four-year presidential terms, thus overlooking the larger and more significant patterns of social and cultural history, including religion.

The aggregate effect of this benign neglect toward religion in our history has been present at all levels of the profession. The 1989 publication of the National Council for the Social Studies, Charting a Course: Social Studies in the 21st Century, barely mentions religion.

Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in the Schools, the 1988 report of the Bradley Commission, devoted somewhat more attention to the subject. A 1985 study of textbooks by Paul Vitz, Equity in Values Education, found "biased representation" of religion. Although a conservative analysis, its criticism is matched by recent studies from the center and the left that note the antiseptic quality of religious history when it is introduced. A fundamental fact is the lack of perception that religious history is vital. Habits of thought creating this are rooted in the pattern of socialization of American citizens, including teachers, which produces both historical illiteracy and a narrow view of existence. The NCSS's 1991 study, Voices of Teachers: Report of a Survey on Social Studies, found that there was little concern among teachers regarding the teaching of religion. It was not an issue. Religious history was introduced, moreover, in only in a small fraction of elective courses (5 percent). That reflects the low level of interest as well.

III. Opportunities for Improvement

Introduction: Communities of Concern

The study and understanding of the role of religion in American history is key to a real insight into the development and character of American communities. In the absence of such historical perception, students -- and the larger communities of which they are a part -- develop a deformed view of the role played by religion and religious institutions in our common life.

Cutting students off from the story of religion in our historical experience fragments the real character of historical development. This condition leads to a flawed perception of how and why our communities act as they do. This poorer, more restricted vision of how we live together has enormous social consequences.

A surprising number of communities ought to be concerned with such a state of affairs. If progress is to be made and change effected, these concerns must be shared by schools, local and state historical and cultural groups, and religious institutions.

We recognize three shared reasons for their involvement:

(1) We have lost the connections or "middle zone" between public and private life. Without rich and vibrant local communities both public and private life are malformed. These three target groups are at the heart of local community reality. This is their burden and their opportunity.

(2) We live as if we were unconnected. We are unaware of the many connections we have to each other. These three communities of interest are in the connections business: they search for, cultivate, and inculcate linkages.

(3) We live in a society in which anti-institutionalism is pervasive. Despite their involvement in a wide variety of the institutions that constitute American life, these groups feel disconnected from those institutions and each other, and in that way they share society's perceptions regarding commitments. These three groups are themselves beleaguered, but more importantly they shape people's perceptions about and commitments to institutions.

A. The School Community

Strategies for change in **The School Community** could include the following:

(1) Formation of an outline of American religious history for circulation and discussion within the educational community.

(2) Preparation of new curricular materials with emphasis on the role of religion in shaping history.

(3) Establishment of teacher education programs that equip teachers to work with this subject. This would include improved teacher certification programs at the college level as well as continuing education activities during the school year and in the summer.

(4) Creation of public education programs that distinguish between teaching about religion and teaching religion. Our civic heritage includes freedom for religious expression as well as freedom from religious establishment.

(5) Formation of a new understanding of citizenship grounded in respect for and interest in others' commitments, not mere toleration of others.

(6) Establishment of linkages among those interested in the development and enhancement of public education.

B. Local and State Historical and Cultural Groups

With the tremendous surge of interest in local history, most of it piecemeal and

fragmentary, we need ways of telling larger stories, ways of integrating fragments of history and culture into larger wholes. Local history societies, for instance, could become places where individual inquiries are integrated into large efforts. These would, in turn, be not only the history of a house or a church or a family, but also the history of a community in all of its complexity and particularity. A new public vocation for the local history society thus emerges.

Strategies for change include, among others:

(1) Model community history projects demonstrating how the pieces can be fit into a whole. This will require new models of research and dissemination.

(2) Targeting such grant sources as the Indiana Heritage Research grants for religious history research and writing.

(3) Preparing resources that aid people with their local inquiries.

(4) Convening people to mine local history efforts for the significance of religion.

(5) Local and state groups' allocating portions of their annual meetings and workshops to religious history.

(6) Teaching about the importance of religious structures as architectural and cultural centers.

(7) Forming library discussion groups.

(8) Developing a variety of public humanities programs.

(9) Making civic and service groups aware of the connections between religion and their activities.

C. Religious Institutions (chiefly but not exclusively congregations)

We have perceptual problems about the significance of churches and synagogues for our civic life. This results from our misleading division of life into public and private spheres and the corresponding relegation of religion to the private side. A result is the assumption on the part of religious institutions and the public that their focus is primarily internal and the failure to take seriously their historical, cultural, and public character. It is also due to the religion's preoccupation with the internal life of their institutions and their failure to notice the public dimensions of their own work.

There are many indications that people are looking for meaning and substance and that they are moving out of suffocating patterns. The Reagan-era emphasis on voluntarism encouraged churches and synagogues to play a larger part. In every public discussion we are meeting needs for help with values, morals, and ethics. This is a time for the religious communities to offer new resources to the culture.

Strategies for change in this sector include:

(1) Having religious communities join in local history fairs which trace the interconnections of religion and the community.

(2) Foster congregational history.

(3) Equip congregations to work with local schools in projects that tell their community's stories. Religious facilities can become, for instance, teaching tools -- places where students can

learn about not only religious architecture but also the origins and development of the congregation.

(4) Form an ecumenical task force to begin thinking about a statewide history project.

Conclusion

We recognize that in each of these three sectors noted above a number of creative and constructive endeavors are under way at the state and national level. We hope both to identify and to build on them. A plan of action follows.

Religious History in the Schools Discussion Group

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James P. Wind, Lilly Endowment

Mary Fortney, Indiana Department of Education

Pamela J. Bennett, Indiana Historical Bureau

James Divita, Marian College

Mary Anthrop, Teacher, Lafayette

Ronald Morris, Teacher, Indianapolis

Kenneth Gladish, Indiana Humanities Council

Nancy Conner, Indiana Humanities Council

David Frederick, Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana

RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS: A PLAN OF ACTION (1993 - 1994)

Step 1: Initial Public Discussion of the Proposal (February - June, 1993)

Complete the draft statement of needs and opportunities by late February and present it at a day-long meeting of key religious, educational, and humanities leaders in Indiana. This meeting will serve as a means of not only assessing the direction proposed by the planning group but also identifying partners in the implementation of the project.

Step 2: Environmental Scan (June - August, 1993)

a. Investigate the following questions:

(1) What is the current state of knowledge and practice with respect to religious history in the schools?

(2) What are the national and state initiatives on religious history? This can in large part be determined through a query placed in the newsletters of major professional organizations.

(3) What is the perception of the need for knowledge on this issue, both in the schools (viz., teachers, social studies supervisors, superintendents, boards) and among the general public?

(4) What is the level of interest in religious history in the schools?

(5) What materials on religious history are available for use in the Indiana schools?

What materials are in use? This bibliographical search would include ERIC and the Religion Index, among others.

Item 2 requires the preparation and release of a query from the committee to be placed

in major professional newsletters in February. Items 1, 3, and 4 would necessitate the preparation, dissemination, and compilation of a questionnaire for each of the three interested communities we have identified. Identification of survey creation and administration required. Funding needs and potential sources need to be addressed immediately. One survey instrument -- for teachers, administrators, and boards -- may suffice. After preparation of the survey, the initial inquiry might be done in a sampling of school systems, followed by a more comprehensive study. Administrators should probably be the first to be surveyed.

Item 5 can be undertaken in cooperation with several historical and educational organizations.

b. Look for a compelling example or case study that illustrates the importance of religious history in Indiana. This step would also include the creation of a listing of issues or stories that could be developed for school use.

Step 3: REPORT (October - December 1993)

Compile and issue a "white paper" on the findings from Step 1. In addition to a targeted mailing, this step would include the convening of a small symposium of key figures to discuss the report and to plan Step 3. An informal timetable would be created.

Step 4: PLANNING CONFERENCE (Begin planning October 1993; conference six months later)

Convene a conference to talk about the issue, using the report as a basis for discussion.

As an outcome of the conference, individuals and single organizations may decide to take action, or various groups may arrive at a consensus concerning the direction in which they would like to proceed cooperatively. As an example of the first alternative, the Indiana Heritage Research Grants might be focused on the subject of Indiana's religious heritage. The latter might include an expansion of the documentary collections available for school use.

Step 5: PROGRAMMING (March - August 1994)

Encourage, generate, and coordinate projects, proposals for funding, and other programmatic results of the planning conference and its aftermath. Establish a formal timetable. This phase may include a major grant application from the planning group.

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